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SHALL WE ACCEPT THE UNIVERSE?

BY JOHN BURROUGHS

I

It was reported of Margaret Fuller that she said she accepted the universe. "By Gad, she'd better!" retorted Carlyle. Carlyle himself seemed to accept the universe with many misgivings. Looking up at the midnight skies he said, "A sad spectacle! If they be inhabited, what a scope for pain and folly, and if they be na' inhabited, what a waste of space." It should not be a hard thing to accept the universe since we have no choice in the matter; but I have found it worth while to look the gift-horse in the mouth, and convince myself that it is really worth accepting. It were a pity to go through life with a suspicion in one's mind that it might have been a better universe, and that some wrong has been done us because we have no freedom of choice in the matter. The thought would add a tinge of bitterness to all our days. And so, after living more than eighty-one years in the world and pondering long and intently upon the many problems which life and nature present, I have come, like Margaret Fuller, to accept the universe, have come frankly to approve that first verdict pronounced upon creation, namely, that it is very good,—good in its sum total up to this astronomic date, whatever phases it may at times present that lead us to a contrary conclusion.

Not that cold and hunger, war and pestilence, tornadoes and earthquakes, are good in a positive sense, but that these and kindred things are vastly overbalanced by the forces and agencies that make for our well-being—that "work together for good"—the sunshine, the cooling breezes, the fertile soil, the stability of the land and sea, the gentle currents, the equipoise of the forces of the earth, air, and water, the order and security of our solar system, and, in the human realm, the

good-will and fellowship that are finally bound to prevail among men and nations.

In remote geologic ages, before the advent of man, when the earth's crust was less stable, when the air was yet loaded with poisonous gases, when terrible and monstrous animal forms held high carnival in the sea and upon the land, it was not in the same sense good,—good for beings constructed as we are now. In future astronomic time, when the earth's air and water and warmth shall have disappeared—a time which science predicts—and all life upon the globe fails, again it will not be good. But in our geologic, biologic, and astronomic age, notwithstanding the fact that cold and suffering, war and pestilence, cyclones and earthquakes, still occur upon the relatively tiny ball that carries us through the vast siderial spaces, the good is greatly in the ascendancy. The voyage is not all calm and sunshine, but it is safe, and the dangers from collision and shipwreck are very remote. It is a vast and lonely sea over which we are journeying, no other ships hail us and bid us god-speed, no messages, wireless or other, may reach us from other shores, or other seas; forces and influences do play upon us from all parts of the empyrean, but, so far as we are aware, no living thing on other spheres takes note of our going or our coming.

In our practical lives we are compelled to separate good from evil—the one being that which favors our well-being, and the other that which antagonizes it—but, viewed as a whole, the universe is all good; it is an infinite complex of compensations out of which worlds and systems of worlds, and all which they hold, have emerged, and are emerging, and will emerge. This is not the language of the heart or of the emotions—our anthropomorphism cries out against it—but it is the language of serene, impartial reason. It is good for us occasionally to get outside the sphere of our personal life and view things as they are in and of themselves. A great demand is made upon our faith—faith in the absolute trustworthiness of the human reason, and in the final beneficence of the forces that rule this universe. Not to solve the mysteries, but to see that they are insoluble, and to rest content in that conclusion, is the task we set ourselves here.

Evidently the tide of life is still at the flood on this planet; its checks and counter currents arise inevitably in a universe whose forces are always, and always must be, in unstable equilibrium.

The love of the Eternal for mankind, and for all other forms of life, is not a parental love—not the love of the mother for her child, or of the father for his son—it is more like the love which a general has for his army; he is to lead that army through hardships, through struggles, through sufferings, and through death, but he is leading it to victory. Many will perish that others may live; the battle is being won daily. Evolution has triumphed. It has been a long and desperate battle, but here we are and we find life sweet. The antagonistic forces which have been overcome have become sources of power. The vast army of living forms moving down the geologic ages has been made strong through the trials and obstacles it has surmounted, till now we behold it in the fulness of its power with man at its head.

II

There is a paragraph in Emerson's Journal on Providence, written when he was twenty-one, which is as broad and as wise and as heterodox as anything he ever wrote. The Providence he depicts is the Providence I see in Nature:

"Providence supports but does not spoil its children. We are called sons, not darlings, of the Deity. There is ever good in store for those who love it, knowledge for those who seek it, and if we do evil we suffer the consequences of evil. Throughout the administration of the world there is the same aspect of stern kindness; of good against your will; good against your good; ten thousand channels of active beneficence, but all flowing with the same regard to general, not particular profit.

"And to such an extent is this great statute policy of God carried that many, nay most, of the great blessings of humanity require cycles of a thousand years to bring them to light."

A remarkable statement to be made in 1824, in New England, and by a fledgling preacher of the orthodox faith, and the descendant of a long line of orthodox clergymen. It is as broad and as impartial as science, and yet makes a strong imaginative appeal. Good at the heart of Nature is the purport of it, not the patent right good of the creeds, but good, free to all who love it, a "stern kindness," and no partial, personal, vacillating Providence whose ear is open only to the password of some sect or cult, or organization.

“Good against your good,” your copyrighted good, your personal, selfish good (unless it is in line with equal good to others)—the broad, universal beneficence of Nature which brought us here and keeps us here, and showers its good upon us as long as we keep in right relations with it; but which goes its appointed way regardless of the sore needs of warring nations or the desperate straits of struggling men. That is the Providence that lasts, that does not change its mind, that is not indulgent, that does not take sides, that is without variableness or shadow of turning. Suppose the law of gravity were changeable, or the law of chemical reactions, or the nature of fire, or air, or water, or cohesion? Gravity never sleeps or varies, yet see bodies rise, see others fall, see the strong master of the weak, see the waters flow and the ground stay; the laws of fluids are fixed, but see the variety of their behavior, the forms in which they crystallize, their solvent power, their stability or instability, their capacity to absorb or conduct heat—flux and change everywhere amid fixity and law, nature is infinitely variable, which opens the door to all forms of life; her goings and comings are on such a large scale, like the rains, the dews, the sunlight, that all creatures get an equal benefit. She sows her seed with such a generous hand that the mass of them are bound to fall upon fertile places. Such as are very limited in range, like those of the swamp plants, are yet cast forth upon the wind so liberally that sooner or later some of them fall upon conditions suitable to them. Nature will cover a whole township with her wind-sown seeds in order to be sure that she hits the small swamp in one corner of it.

A stream of energy, not described by the adjective inexhaustible, bears the universe along, and all forms of life, man with the rest, take their chances amid its currents and its maelstroms. The good providence shows itself in the power of adaptation all forms of life possess. Some forms of sea weed or sea grass grow where the waves pound the shore incessantly. How many frail marine creatures are wrecked upon the shore, but how many more are not wrecked! How many ships go down in the sea, but how many more are wafted safely over it!

The Providence in nature seems intent only on playing the game, irrespective of the stakes, which to us seem so important. Whatever the issue, Nature is the winner. She cannot lose. Her beneficence is wholesale. Her myriad

forms of life are constantly passing through "the curtain of fire" of her inorganic forces, and the casualties are great, but the majority get through. The assault goes on and will ever go on. It is like a stream of water that is whole and individual at every point, but fixed and stable at no point. To play the game, to keep the currents going—from the depths of siderial space to the shallow pool by the road side; from the rise and fall of nations, to the brief hour of the minute summer insects, the one over-arching purpose seems to be to give free rein to life, to play one form against another, to build up and tear down, to gather together and to scatter—no rest, no end, nothing final—rocks decaying to build more rocks, worlds destroyed to build more worlds, nations disintegrating to build more nations, organisms perishing to feed more organisms, life playing into the hands of death everywhere, and death playing into the hands of life, sea and land interchanging, tropic and arctic meeting and mingling, day and night, winter and summer chasing each other over the earth—what a spectacle of change, what a drama never completed! Vast worlds and systems in fiery flux, one little corner of the cosmos teeming with life, vast areas of it, like Saturn and Jupiter, dead and barren through untold millions of years; collisions and disruptions in the heavens, tornadoes and earthquake and wars and pestilence upon the earth—surely it all sounds worse than it is, for we are all here to see and contemplate the great spectacle—sounds worse than it is to us because we are a part of the outcome of all these raging and conflicting forces. Whatever has failed, we have succeeded, and the beneficent forces are still coming our way.

The greatest of human achievements and the most precious is that of the great creative artist. In words, in color, in sounds, in forms, man comes nearest to emulating the Creative Energy itself. Nature is the art of God, as Sir Thomas Browne said. It seems as if the pleasure and the purpose of the Creative Energy was endless invention, to strike out new forms, to vary perpetually the pattern. Myriads of forms, myriads of types, inexhaustible variety in air, earth, water, ten thousand ways to achieve the same end, a prodigality of means that bewilders the mind; to produce something new and different, an endless variety of forms that fly, that swim, that creep, in the sea, in the air, on the earth, in the fields, in the woods, on the shore. How many

ways Nature has of scattering her seeds, how many types of wings, of hooks, of springs! In some she offers a wage to bird or quadruped in the shape of fruit, others she forcibly attaches to the passer-by. In all times and places there is a riot of invention.

III

Are we not men enough to face things as they are? Must we be cosseted a little? Can we not be weaned from the old theological pap? Can we not rest content in the general beneficence of Nature's Providence? Must you and I have a special hold upon the Great Mother's apron strings?

I see the Nature Providence going its impartial way. I see drought and flood, heat and cold, war and pestilence, defeat and death, besetting man at all times, in all lands. I see hostile germs in the air he breathes, in the water he drinks, in the soil he tills. I see the elemental forces as indifferent toward him as toward ants and fleas. I see pain and disease and defeat and failure dogging his footsteps. I see the righteous defeated and the ungodly triumphant—this and much more I see, and yet I behold through the immense biological vista behind us the race of man slowly—oh, so slowly!—emerging from its brute or semi-human ancestry into the full estate of man, from blind instinct and savage passion into the light of reason and moral consciousness. I behold the great scheme of evolution unfolding despite all the delays and waste and failures, and the higher forms appearing upon the scene. I see on an immense scale, and as clearly as in a demonstration in an experimental laboratory, that good comes out of evil, that the impartiality of the Nature Providence is best, that we are made strong by what we overcome, that man is man because he is as free to do evil as to do good, that life is as free to develop hostile forms as to develop friendly, that power waits upon him who earns it, that disease, wars, the unloosened, devastating elemental forces, have each and all played their part in developing and hardening man and giving him the heroic fibre. The good would have no tang, no edge, no cutting quality without evil to oppose it. Life would be tasteless or insipid, without pain and struggle and disappointment. Behold what the fiery furnace does for the metals—welding or blending or separating or purifying them, and behold the hell of contending and destructive forces out of which the earth came, and again

behold the grinding and eroding forces, the storms and earthquakes and eruptions, and disintegrations that have made it the green inhabitable world that now sustains us. No, the universal processes do not need disinfecting, the laws of the winds, the rains, the sunlight do not need rectifying. "I do not want the constellations any nearer," says Whitman. I do not want the natural Providence any more attentive. The celestial laws are here underfoot and our treading upon them does not obliterate or vulgarize them. Chemistry is incorruptible and immortal, it is the handmaid of God; the yeast works in the elements of our bread of life while we sleep; the stars send their influences, the earth renews itself, the brooding heavens gathers us under its wings, and all is well with us if we have the heroic hearts to see it.

In the curve of the moon's or of the planets' disks, all broken or irregular lines of the surface are lost to the eye—the wholeness of the sphere form subordinates and obliterates them all—so all the failures and cross purposes and disharmonies in nature and life do not suffice to break or mar the vast general beneficence; the flowing universal good is obvious above all.

So long as we think of the Eternal in terms of our experience of the knowledge of concrete things and beings which life discloses to us, we are involved in contradictions. The ancients visualized their gods and goddesses, Jove, Apollo, Minerva, Juno, and all the others. Shall we do this for the Eternal and endow it with personality? Into what absurdities it leads us! The unspeakable, the unseeable, the unthinkable, the inscrutable, and yet the most obvious fact that life yields to us! Nearer and more vital than our own bodies, than our own parents, and yet eluding our grasp; vehemently denied, passionately accepted, scoffed, praised, feared, worshipped, giving rise to deism, atheism, pantheism, to idolatry, to persecution, to martyrdom, the great Reality in which we live and move and have our being, and yet for that very reason, because it is a part of us, or rather we are a part of it, are we unable to define it or seize it as a reality apart from ourselves. Our denial proves it; just as we use gravity to overcome gravity, so we use God to deny God. Just as pure light is of no color, but split up makes all the colors that we see, so God divided and reflected makes all the half gods we worship in life. Green and blue and red and orange are not in the objects that reflect them, but are

an experience of the eye. We might with our tongues deny the air, but our spoken words prove it. We cannot lift ourselves over the fence by our own waist-bands, no more can we by searching find God, because He is not an object that has place and form and limitations; He is the fact of the fact, the life of the life, the soul of the soul, the incomprehensible, the sum of all contradictions, the unit of all diversity; he who knows Him, knows Him not, he who is without Him, is full of Him; turn your back upon Him, then turn your back upon gravity, upon air, upon light. He cannot be seen, but by Him all seeing comes, He cannot be heard, yet by Him all hearing comes; He is not a being, yet apart from Him there is no being—there is no apart from Him. We contradict ourselves when we deny Him; it is ourselves we deny, and equally do we contradict ourselves when we accept Him; it is something apart from ourselves which we accept.

When half-gods go, says Emerson, the gods arrive. But half-gods never go; we can house and entertain no other. What can we do with the Infinity, the Eternal? We can only deal with things in time and space—things that can be numbered and measured. What can we do with the infinitely little, the infinitely great? All our gods are half-gods made in our own image. No surer does the wax take the imprint of the seal than does the Infinite take the imprint of our finite minds. We create a Creator, we rule a Ruler, we invent a heaven and hell; they are laws of our own being, seen externally.

How, then, shall we adjust our lives to the conception of a universal, non-human, non-finite algebraic God? They adjust themselves. Do your work, deal justly, love rightness, make the most of yourself, cherish the good, the beautiful, the true, practice the Christian and the heathen virtues of soberness, meekness, reverence, charity, unselfishness, justice, mercy, singleness of purpose—obey the commandments, the Golden Rule, imbue your spirit with the wisdom of all ages, for thus is the moral order of the world upheld.

The moral order and the intellectual order go hand in hand. Upon one rests our relations to our fellows, upon the other rests our relation to the Cosmos.

We must know, and we must love, we must do, and we must enjoy, we must warm judgment with feeling, and illumine conscience with reason.

Admit, if we must, that we are in the grip of a merciless power—that outside of our own kind there is nothing that shows us mercy or consideration—that the Nature of which we form a part goes her own way regardless of us, yet let us keep in mind that the very fact that we are here and find life good is proof that the mercilessness of Nature has not been inconsistent with our permanent well-being. The fact that flowers bloom and fruit and grains ripen, that the sun shines, that the rain falls, that food nourishes us, that love warms us, that evolution has brought us thus far on our way, that our line of descent has survived all the hazards of the geologic ages—all point to the fact that we are on the winning side, that our well-being is secured in the constitution of things. For all the cataclysms and disruptions, the globe has ripened on the great siderial tree, and has become the fit abode of its myriad forms of life. Though we may be run down and crushed by the great terrestrial forces about us, just as we may be run down and crushed in the street, yet these forces play a part in the activities that sustain us; without them we should not be here to suffer at their hands.

Our life depends from moment to moment upon the air we breathe, yet its winds and tempests may destroy us; it depends from day to day upon the water we drink, yet its floods may sweep us away. We walk and climb and work and move mountains by gravity, and yet gravity may break every bone in our bodies. We spread our sails to the wind and they become our faithful servitors, yet the winds may drive us into the jaws of the breakers. How are our lives bound up and identified with the merciless forces that surround us! Out of the heart of fate comes our freedom; out of the reign of death comes our life; out of the sea of impersonal energy come our personalities; out of the rocks comes the soil that sustains us; out of the fiery nebulae came the earth with its apple blossoms and its murmuring streams; out of the earth came man. If the cosmic forces were not merciless, if they did not go their own way, if they made exceptions for you and me, if in them there *were* variableness and even a shadow of turning, the vast inevitable beneficence of Nature would vanish, and the caprice and uncertainty of man take its place. If the sun were to stand still for Joshua to conquer his enemies, there would be no further need for it to resume its journey. What I am trying to get rid of

is the pitying and meddling Providence which our feeble faith and half-knowledge have enthroned above us. We need stronger meat than the old theology affords us. We need to contemplate the ways of a Providence that has not been subsidized; we need encouragement in our attitude of heroic courage and faith toward an impersonal universe; we need to have our petty anthropomorphic views of things shaken up and hung out in the wind to air. The universe is not a school-room on the Montessori system, nor a benevolent institution run on the most modern improved plan. It is a work-a-day field where we learn from hard knocks, and where the harvest, not too sure, waits upon our own right arm.

JOHN BURROUGHS.